



Refugee Resettlement Industry on the Defensive

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The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States is sending shock waves through the refugee resettlement industry.

On the campaign trail, Trump promised to suspend the Syrian refugee resettlement program, as well as the resettlement of refugees from countries that are hostile to the United States.

Two days before the election, at a rally in Minnesota, Trump also stated that “a Trump administration will not admit any refugees without the support of the local community where they are being placed,” a policy that will simply enforce the “consultation clause” of the Refugee Act of 1980, an element of the statute the Obama administration has largely ignored.

Even refugee resettlement industry executives acknowledge that President-elect Trump will have the legal authority to implement these policy changes on his own.

“Mr. Trump has made clear his intent to end the resettlement of Syrian refugees, and it will be within the president’s authority to set refugee allocations by country and overall,” Doris Meissner of the left-leaning Migration Policy Institute told the Thompson Reuters Foundation on Wednesday.

“If [Trump] decide[s] to cut the state funds or federal funds for refugees, refugee resettlement will collapse and we won’t be able to bring in any refugees to this country,” Vidhya Manivannan, formerly with Church World Services, one of the nine voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) who receive more than \$1 billion a year in federal funding, told Newsweek on Wednesday, one day after Trump’s election.

“In the U.S., there’s not a quota that has to be filled. The U.S. has a budgeted amount of money to do refugee resettlement, but there’s no requirement that the U.S. resettle a single refugee, and there’s no legal obligation to do it,” Bill Frelick, director of Human Rights Watch’s refugee program, told Newsweek.

It would be “fairly easy” for President Trump to suspend the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States, Frelick told Newsweek, “because this is discretionary.”

Frelick said Trump's victory left him "shell-shocked," a word that described the reaction of the entire refugee resettlement industry.

In FY 2016, 85,000 refugees were resettled in the United States. The Obama administration has proposed resettling 110,000 refugees in FY 2017, which began on October 1, but Congress has not approved the budget for the full fiscal year. The current interim budget deal, which in theory only authorizes the resettlement of 85,000 refugees annually, expires on December 9.

Early indications from reports on the Department of State's interactive website suggest that the federal bureaucracy may already be responding to the election of Donald Trump by reducing the number of newly arriving refugees.

In October, the first month of FY 2017, 9,935 total refugees arrived in the United States, an annual run rate of about 119,000. Of these, 1,297 were from Syria.

During the first eight days of November, from the the first to Election Day, 2,527 refugees arrived in the United States, of which 305 were from Syria.

On Wednesday, the day after the election, 679 refugees arrived, of which 92 were from Syria.

On Thursday, only 449 refugees arrived, 68 from Syria, but on Friday, only 10 refugees arrived, none from Syria.

No refugees arrived on Saturday and Sunday.

As of 11:30 am eastern on Monday, 36 refugees have arrived, 12 of whom are from Syria.

Opponents of the Obama administration's policy to increase refugee resettlement also agree that President-elect Trump will have the authority to dramatically decrease the flow of refugees after his inauguration.

"Donald Trump promised to limit the flow of Muslim refugees. Current law leaves refugee admissions up to presidential discretion, and he could accomplish this on Day One. Compared to a religious test, barring refugees from countries with large Muslim populations would be easy to enforce and, assuming no reallocation, could reduce refugee flows by 40 percent," David Bier of the Cato Institute told the Thompson Reuters Foundation.

"Regarding legal immigration, refugee resettlement from the Middle East is likely to be suspended, pending a bottom-up review of the system," Mark Krikorian, executive director, Center for Immigration Studies told the Thompson Reuters Foundation.

On Election Day, Lavinia Limon, Executive Director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), one of the nine leading volunteer agencies who receive more than \$1 billion a year in federal funding, weighed in on the election with a statement that clearly favored Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

"I've been working with refugees for 43 years through Republican and Democratic administrations, and I've never ever seen refugees and immigrants as under attack as they are in this campaign by Mr. Trump. I think it's very divisive and it's very frightening for refugees and immigrants," Limon said.

“It started with the Muslim ban, and then saying that we’re not going to bring any refugees from “terrorist” countries, and now he’s talking about extreme vetting. I don’t think he really understands how extreme the vetting is now – refugees are the most scrutinized people coming to the U.S. But he is echoing a lot of the anti-refugee resettlement voices online,” she added.

“On the other hand, Clinton would likely continue many of the same efforts that the Obama Administration has begun, such as increasing the number of resettled refugees and promoting access to education and the work force,” the USCRI Election Day statement said.

“We’d be looking for her to continue the work that Obama has begun around engaging more nations in providing more resources, but more importantly, providing rights, to refugees,” Limon added.

After the voters resoundingly rejected Hillary Clinton and her support for increasing refugee resettlement in the United States on Tuesday, Limon took another tack.

“We encourage our new President to continue the tradition of the best of American values including equal protection and respect for every member of society. Worldwide, millions are denied basic human rights and we are strengthened as a country when all of humanity is recognized. America has always been the beacon of hope for the oppressed and this must continue,” she said in a statement.

Mark Hetfield, CEO of HIAS (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), another of the nine leading VOLAGS, urged President-elect Trump to keep the flow of refugees coming into the country, despite his campaign promises to the contrary:

As a bitter and hard-fought campaign for president comes to an end, so should the divisive rhetoric about refugees. America has always been at its greatest when we have welcomed refugees to our shores, and at its weakest when we have shut our doors out of fear. We urge President-elect Trump to demonstrate that America is not afraid of refugees, and to show leadership for human rights and refugee protection during the global refugee crisis, the largest of its kind since the World War II.

Anticipated policy decisions from the Trump administration are not the only problems facing the refugee resettlement industry.

A number of states (Maine, Texas, New Jersey, and Kansas) have withdrawn recently from the federal refugee resettlement program, and the Tennessee General Assembly announced that it has hired the Thomas More Law Center to file a lawsuit to end the federal government’s resettlement of refugees in the Volunteer State on Tenth Amendment grounds.